

## Continuity and break points: some aspects of the contemporary debate in narrative theory

Franco Passalacqua  
Università degli Studi di Milano

Federico Pianzola  
Università degli Studi di Firenze

---

### Abstract

This article presents some reflections on the concepts, terminology, and epistemological grounds of narrative theory. Our remarks are focused on the proposals advanced at the first RRN conference and they concern in particular two issues: the theoretical difference between classical and postclassical narratology and the paradigms of the contemporary debate. In the first part of the paper we focus on the definitional task of narrative theory; in the second part we describe the epistemology of and the theories built on two opposite paradigms: the mimetic and the constructivist. Our conclusions highlight the continuity and the break points between contemporary theories, soliciting narratologists to answer to the many questions raised.

---

### Keywords

Narrative theory, narrative sequence, events, constructivism, epistemology, narratology

---

### Contacts

fr.passa@gmail.com  
f.pianzola@gmail.com

---

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This brief article is aimed at the elaboration and problematization of some critical questions often addressed within the contemporary debate in narrative theory. In particular, we are looking at the topics discussed at the recent RRN conference in Fribourg. Two main reasons can justify the choice of limiting the field of our remarks: first, the outstanding quality of the lectures, both for their argumentations and for the novelty of the proposals; second, the specificity of the subject at issue — «Redefinitions of the Sequence in Postclassical Narratology» — that encouraged the participants to focus their attention on the definitional problems of narrative, a crucial step in the growth of the discipline.

Beside the theoretical interest of such a specific perspective, we regard the task of defining narrative as an important preliminary path to be followed in order to reflect on broader issues concerning the role of narrative studies, both within the humanities and with respect to other scientific disciplines (e.g. cognitive sciences, psychology, marketing, etc.). Our explicit intention is not to give any answer but to ask further questions that might suggest possible orientations for future remarks. We reckon among the most important tasks a reflection on the epistemological grounds of narrative theory, because we

<sup>1</sup> Sections 1, 2, 6, are by Franco Passalacqua; sections 3, 4, 5 are by Federico Pianzola.

think that many incompatibilities or frictions between terminologies, models and theories are often underestimated. We think it is important to the extent that such incomprehensions may negatively affect the debate or even thwart the formation of a shared acknowledgment of the specificity of the concepts used in narrative theory.

In the light of the considerations above, our questions will be addressed to the classical/postclassical distinction in narrative studies; to the definition of «narrative sequence»; to the distinction between the two narrative sequences (*fabula/sjužhet* and definitions alike); to the epistemology of different paradigms in narrative theory.

## 2. Classical and postclassical

One of the first issues debated at the RRN conference was the classical/postclassical distinction in narrative studies. Since 1997, when David Herman proposed it for the first time in his article *Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology*,<sup>2</sup> many scholars had their say on the topic, questioning the distinction and expressing contrasting opinions. One option is to detect the possible differences with respect to the matters at issue, another one is to refer to the history of the discipline. We can disagree with the terms used — according to Meir Sternberg, for instance, getting together under the same label incompatible research programs is a misleading effort<sup>3</sup> — or assume it as a performative distinction, like Monika Fludernik and Raphaël Baroni do.<sup>4</sup> The latter option gives to the label «classical narratology» a weaker connotation, yet it preserves the temporal criterion. A further limitation may be related to geography: considering as «classical narratology» the French structuralism, an historical accuracy is granted — it is known that the term «narratology» was introduced by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969<sup>5</sup> — but it would exclude from the narratological field all the works about narrative contemporary to French structuralism and that had interesting relations with it, whether of affinity or of opposition.

In this paper, we are adopting a weak, but not too limited, classification, identifying as «classical narratology» the works by different schools and critical approaches up to the '80s, and as «postclassical narratology» the wide set of theories, perspectives and programs developed in the last thirty years. This choice does not exclude a connection between the two parties, although it incurs in some difficulties when considering proposals that, despite their early temporal collocation, cannot be ascribed to classical narratology. The main reason of our choice is that such a preliminary distinction allows us to focus on questions concerning theoretical aspects: e.g. is there continuity between classical and postclassical studies? Is there any radical break that precludes the detection of a common ground?

---

<sup>2</sup> David Herman, *Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology*, «PMLA», n. 112: 5 (Summer 1997), pp. 1046-1059.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. his statement in Meir Sternberg, *Contextualizing Narratology: Arguments for a Functionalist and Constructivist Approach to Narrative*, «Enthymema», IV (2011).

<sup>4</sup> «Il peut être utile, dans certains contextes institutionnels, de souligner que la narratologie est une discipline encore bien vivante et qui ne se limite pas à une seule approche épistémologique»; Raphaël Baroni, *Rapport du 1er colloque international organisé par le Réseau Romand de Narratologie*, [http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport colloque RRN2011.pdf](http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport%20colloque%20RRN2011.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron*, Mouton, La Haye-Paris, 1969.

With respect to discontinuities, Monika Fludernik and Jan Alber identify four parameters that distinguish postclassical studies: (i) reader-oriented communicative models, (ii) methodological extension, (iii) investigation of new thematic contents, (iv) extension of narratological analysis to literature outside the novel.<sup>6</sup> Along this direction, the reorientation of narrative studies from the '80s is seen mainly as a redefinition of the epistemic coordinates, due to «methodological, thematic, and contextual influences from outside»<sup>7</sup> and directed towards an overcoming of the limits imposed by structuralist linguistics. The opening to heuristic tools provided by different linguistic approaches (enunciative, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, etc.), by cognitive sciences, social sciences, psychology and artificial intelligence studies, led narratology to a pragmatic turn. Such a change allowed taking into account many more aspects of the narrative process and induced a swerve with respect to the questions addressed: if classical narratology is focused on the definition and structure of narrative, postclassical theories integrate it with questions concerning interpretation, rhetorical dynamics, cognitive and emotional activities of the reading process, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the classical-postclassical relationship with respect to the features outlined above seems to provide a good argument in favour of an historical survey centred on the discontinuities that the two labels might underlie. However, before we can subscribe to this judgement, we shall consider some other remarks, which are moved by theoretical purposes. Herman, for instance, identifies as a distinctive feature of postclassical narratology the intersection with cognitive sciences, which would enable a radically different approach to the reader-discourse relationship.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Brian Richardson points out that an epistemic flaw of classical theories may be overcome by the so called «unnatural narratology»: «the study of unnatural narrative is directed against what one might call “mimetic reductionism,” that is, the argument that each and every aspect of narrative can be explained on the basis of our real-world knowledge and resulting cognitive parameters».<sup>10</sup> Unnatural narratology is thus anchored to an anti-mimetic assumption — which is regarded as necessary for any further development of narrative studies — that would grant the possibility of a critical reading of a much broader range of narratives than of what would be possible with traditional narratological tools and methods.

We think that, thanks to its fundamental epistemological role, the anti-mimetic principle is at the basis of some of the most interesting proposals that drift away from classical studies.<sup>11</sup> Before turning to consider such theories in more detail, however, it is worth mentioning what we acknowledge as an unavoidable point of all narrative theories, be they classical, postclassical, mimetic or anti-mimetic. This more or less explicit basic as-

---

<sup>6</sup> Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, Introduction to *Postclassical Narratology. Approaches and Analyses*, Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (eds.), The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Gerald Prince, *Classical and/or Postclassical Narratology*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> David Herman, Introduction to *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, David Herman (ed.), The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1999, pp. 2-3. Cfr. Idem, *Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology*, «PMLA», n. 112: 5, pp. 1046-1059.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narratology, Unnatural Narrives: Beyond Mimetic Models*, «Narrative», n. 18: 2, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narratology, Unnatural Narrives: Beyond Mimetic Models*, cit.; Manfred Jahn, *Stanley Fish and the Constructivist Basis of Postclassical Narratology*, in *Anglistentag 1999 Mainz: Proceedings*, B. Reitz and S. Rieuwertsv (eds.), WVT, Trier, 2000, pp. 375-387.

sumption is that narrative, since it exists only through a medium, inevitably performs some kind of referential act, what is often called «representation». This does not necessarily entail that specifying the representational ability of narrative is equivalent to giving a definition of narrative;<sup>12</sup> we are simply stating that narratives always represent something: time, action, change, events, etc. In other words, we think that a reflection on the representational ability of narrative shall be part of the common grounds of narrative theory, both for realist positions that assume that the represented world has a direct link to a reality outside narrative, and for positions that reject such direct link, assuming a different ontological commitment towards the narrated reality.

The brief comments given above indicate the two main points that our following remarks will face: on the one hand, the task of highlighting continuity and breakpoints among different narrative theories; on the other hand, the confrontation with the problems and questions that the anti-mimetic principle brings up about the foundations and the extent of all narrative theories. The difficulties that emerge along these two lines, far from being a downside of narratology, give evidence of the vitality of the discipline and, analogously, the conflicts and contrasts hint at a forthcoming intense debate.

### 3. What is a definition of «narrative»?

The first speech at the RRN conference was delivered by Gerald Prince who, claiming that «narrative sequences represents series of situations and one or more events»,<sup>13</sup> offered a quick recognition of what number of events is established in different definitions as the minimum requirement for narrative. Starting from Gérard Genette's one-event narrative,<sup>14</sup> and moving to definitions that set additional requirements needed to characterize narrative sequence, Prince continued listing some of the features that have sometimes been included in narrative theories: causal or otherwise relevant relations, pragmatic conditions, emotions (Aristotle's fear and pity), cognitive effects, evaluation (Labov), appropriate context, intentionality, etc. In three days many other theories have been recalled and a fair amount of definitions have been compared and criticized; here are some of them:

Despite its apparent simplicity of reference, plot is one of the most elusive terms in narrative theory. Narrative theorists have used the term to refer to a variety of different phenomena. Many key definitions of narrative hinge on the aspect of temporal sequentiality, and the repeated attempts to redefine the parameters of plot reflect both the centrality and the complexity of the temporal dimension of narrative. (Hilary P. Dannenberg, «Plot», in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 435).

A narrative (Fr. *récit*; Ger. *Erzählung*) is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who

---

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. section 6 below.

<sup>13</sup> This and the following quotations where no reference is given are taken from the talks and the debate held in Fribourg. Some of them might be found in the forthcoming proceedings of the conference; for more information, see <http://www.narratologie.ch/>.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1980 [1972], trans. Jane E. Lewin, p. 30.

(mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure). (Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, Routledge, London, 2009, p. 6).

Language is the only semiotic system (besides formal notation systems) in which it is possible to formulate propositions. Stories are about characters placed in a changing world, and narration is crucially dependent on the ability of a medium to single out existents and attribute properties to them. Neither images nor pure sound possesses this intrinsic ability: sound has no meaning, and pictures can show, but they cannot refer (Worth 1981). (Marie-Laure Ryan, «Narration in Various Media», in *The living handbook of narratology*, Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), Hamburg University Press, Hamburg, [http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration\\_in\\_Various\\_Media](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration_in_Various_Media), [view date: 20 Jun 2011]).

In all representational art, therefore, including seemingly unilinear narrative with no overt exposition, the process of reading necessarily subsumes a process of spatial reconstruction. And action and description are not so much discrete segments as functions of discourse—representational (“mimetic”) functions that relate to complementary aspects of the world, the object or locus of one progressing along the dimension of fictive time and the other's resting in those of fictive space. As such, action and description form not givens but inferences, constructs, opposed but not divorced frames of coherence. Whether in tense or harmonious opposition, they may cohabit in the very same piece of text; and it is only according to the dominant function—or primary frame of intelligibility—that we can reasonably speak of actional or descriptive writing. (Meir Sternberg, *Ordering the Unordered: Time, Space and Descriptive Coherence*, «Yale French Studies», n. 61 (1981), p. 73).

The passages quoted above are a good sample of how the parameters of the definition of narrative may vary in every proposal. As it is evident also from Prince's initial statement («narrative sequences represents series of situations and one or more events»), it is a matter of fact that almost all definitions of narrative deal with semantics — i.e. with the representational ability of narrative: a narrative represents ‘things’ that are  $x$  —, and pointing out what properties such represented ‘things’ have is often supposed to be essential in order to define narrative — at least, this is what mimetic theories assume.<sup>15</sup> The fundamental ‘things’ a narrative can refer to are, among the others: «a possible world», «protagonists of anthropomorphic nature», «time», «space», «actions» (Fludernik); «characters», «a changing world» (Ryan); «world», «time», «space», «événements» (Sternberg).

What characterizes every definition is the role attributed to the referents of narrative: for some theories certain elements and their properties are a necessary and sufficient condition for the definition of narrative, in other cases they do not have a definitional role.<sup>16</sup> Of all the representable elements mentioned in the definitions above, terms like «situation» and «event» (which recur in many other definitions) are the more negotiable and present us with further definitional tasks, which entail, at least in principle, some assumptions about such complex entities. Some scholars adopt «possible world semantics», other options may be «situation semantics» or «event semantics»;<sup>17</sup> anyway, defining narrative in terms of «situations» or «events» presupposes a set of further questions and problems regarding how we use language to refer to ‘things’. The debate about semantics

---

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. section 2 above.

<sup>16</sup> See section 6 below for some observations about this difference.

<sup>17</sup> To quote just one introductory work on the subject: Angelika Kratzer, «Situations in Natural Language Semantics», in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2010 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/situations-semantics/>.

is very intense in linguistics and of course there are opposite positions within the discipline; we are not suggesting that every attempt to define narrative should start from a semantic theory, our aim is to highlight some implications, entailments and drawbacks of narrative theories. Namely, it is crucial to understand: what are considered to be the elements represented in narrative? What are the elements that constitute narrative sequences? Is our understanding of narrative biased by the terms we use to describe it?

#### 4. What are the elements of a narrative?

Raphaël Baroni, in his report of the first RRN conference, noted that «les conférenciers ont souligné l'importance de redynamiser la séquence narrative en l'abordant par le biais des compétences cognitives des interprètes et des performances interprétatives qui actualisent les récits. Dans une telle perspective, de nouvelles questions peuvent à nouveau être adressées à la nature, à la fonction et au fonctionnement des séquences narratives».<sup>18</sup> Agreeably, the questions that pertain to narrative theory concern the nature, the function and the functioning of narrative; however, very often, what is mainly regarded as essential for the definition of narrative is only its nature, i.e. the elements of which it is composed. Just to quote some examples, in the above definitions these elements are: «temporal sequence» (Dannenberg); «representation of a possible world» with all its specifications, «linguistic and/or visual medium» (Fludernik); events organised on a temporal line (Sternberg).

Concepts like «event», «situation», «state», or others alike, are often used (sometimes implicitly) without too much definitional efforts and an accepted solution is to assume that by common sense we all have a satisfactory knowledge of what such terms indicate. On the contrary, in Fribourg, Peter Hühn gave a specific and very interesting definition of «event», conceived as a «decisive, unexpected and surprising turn within the sequence of elements. Events are changes of states, which fulfil the additional requirement of special existential significance». We would like to make some considerations about his proposal.

It is noteworthy that Hühn is defining the core (necessary) element of narrative sequence relating it to a process of meaning-attribution: the change in the sequence is «decisive», «unexpected», «surprising», «significant» only with regard to an interpreter who can evaluate the change, and such ability is influenced by the cultural, historical and literary context. Hühn's examples of «eventful non-events» show how the concept of «event» is strictly connected to language (or other media) use: in fact, it can be defined in terms of meaning-attribution, without including other features of the change. In other words, in order to define an event it is necessary to specify what a «change» is and how it can be «significant». Some thorough considerations might be interesting, because Hühn's concepts of «event» and «eventfulness» are a bit twisted, but at the same time he considers their limits and possible uses, therefore highlighting a few decisive aspects that concern all narrative theories.

Hühn's definition of «event» requires a «change», he is thus assuming that there is a time lag, a temporal variation, which is somehow part of our experience of narrative, of what we do with narrative. «Eventfulness» (the property of being a significant change) is

---

<sup>18</sup> Raphaël Baroni, *Rapport du 1er colloque international organisé par le Réseau Romand de Narratologie*, [http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport\\_colloque\\_RRN2011.pdf](http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport_colloque_RRN2011.pdf).

a necessary requirement for the tellability of a story, and even a «non-event» — be it (i) the failure of an expected significant change to occur, or (ii) the non-significance of a particular expected change<sup>19</sup> — can be «eventful», for instance, if it is foregrounded. Hence, if we need to specify how we experience both a change (time lag) and its being significant, we need: for (i), a definition that includes a temporal variation that did not actually occur in the *fabula*; and for (ii), a definition that accounts for how we attribute a significant role to a change that is not significant for the *fabula*.

In our opinion, both kind of «non-events» seem to call for a definition of «event» that relies on both narrative sequences, the *fabula* and the *sjuzhet*. Otherwise, how would it be possible to account for (i) temporal variation and (ii) significance that cannot be attributed to the *fabula* alone? Is it possible to develop a solution for which «time» and «significance» are somehow related to both sequences?

Well, according to Hühn, «narration is distinguished from other discourse type by the temporal organization of the sequence of happenings on the level of *histoire*, constituted and mediated in a text or in any other media», and «non-events exclusively refer to the sequence of happenings, to the *histoire* level as mediated by the text, they do not normally occur in the mediation process as negative equivalent of presentation events».<sup>20</sup> He is clearly stating that narrative is defined by virtue of the properties (time and significance) of the *fabula*, though a fundamental process is not clear: how is the *fabula* «constituted» by the *sjuzhet*? Since a change can be eventful if a temporal variation actually happens or (i) if it is only virtually possible and somehow expected: to what extent does such constitutive process affect our relation to time? Since a change can be eventful if it is decisive in the *fabula* or (ii) if it is significant for other reasons: to what extent does such constitutive process affect our relation to significance?

According to Hühn a «non-event» in the «presentation sequence» (*sjuzhet*) is not possible, therefore narrative cannot generate expectation in the reader only by virtue of the way it is told and cannot generate expectations which only concern the level of presentation. Hühn's explanation of this condition, however, is not very convincing: «since decisive changes in this dimension [*sjuzhet*] are the exception, their essence is not perceived at all and not perceived as eventful». We find Hühn's proposal very thought-provoking, but the latter statement seems to contradict the definition of event as a «significant change of state». So, in order to avoid such contradiction, a revision of the definition is needed: either we assume that events are elements of the *fabula* only, or we have to exclude «significance» from the definition of «presentation events». The latter case brings us to use for the definition of the same concept criteria that are different with respect to the sequence to which the change belongs: for the *fabula* an account of virtually possible outcomes is necessary; for the *sjuzhet* it is not needed.

Remarkably, we can find some helpful suggestions in the work of other scholars, namely in the proposals by Raphaël Baroni and John Pier. Baroni argues that «des actions virtuelles, esquissées par le récit et échafaudées par des lecteurs qui progressent dans le texte, prennent dès lors autant d'importance que les actions effectivement racontées». Although he is interested in the social and anthropological value of narrative, Baroni's

---

<sup>19</sup> Examples of the first type are: the non-arriving of Godot in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the non-appearance of the beast in Henry James' *The jump of the beast*.

<sup>20</sup> «Presentation events» are «decisive changes in the narrator position or consciousness in the course of telling a story», hence a matter of mediation (point of view, focalization, reported speech and thought).

comment can be relevant for other aspects of narrative as well, to the extent that it underlines the interdependency of the two sequences, in particular with respect to the role of the reader. «La construction narrative d'un *pathos* durable ne repose pas uniquement sur une forme d'identification au personnage, [...] il dépend tout autant des virtualités inactualisées de l'histoire, mais néanmoins actualisables sous forme d'hypothèses interprétatives». It would be interesting to test if it might be useful to investigate the «narrative construction» of an event (or sequence of events) taking into account «non-actualised virtualities» and «interpretative hypotheses» as well.

In a similar way, John Pier refers to Pierce's semiotic model to maintain that «sequence is neither a pre-existent nor an immanent structure, it is prototypical because it is postulated as a semiotic hypothesis, a diagrammatic icon». Retaining the same criteria for the definition of both sequence, the *fabula* itself «is produced in the inferential interaction between overcoded and undercoded abduction, *fabula* is no more seen as a signified but as an interpretant, a sign created in the mind of the interpreter via another sign». If we acknowledge that *fabula* is somehow ontologically dependent from *sjuzhet*, what follows is that both sequences have to be considered for the definition of narrative.

Below, we will try to show how dealing with *sjuzhet* only as a mediatory level, without specifying the role it plays in our ontological commitment is reductive to many extents; before that, however, it is advisable to look at how the two sequences are usually regarded in many narrative theories.

## 5. What sequence are we talking about?

In the previous paragraph we tried to juxtapose different proposals insofar they address similar problems from different perspectives. In doing so, we underestimated a fundamental question: in a narrative theory, when we refer to sequence, what sequence are we talking about?

We have seen that Hühn focuses on the *fabula* in defining the concept of «event»; Pier adopts the Peircean cognitive interpretive triadic conception of the sign and semiosis, *fabula* being the «interpretant» and *sjuzhet* being the «sign» both equally important with respect to the represented «object»; Baroni gives special attention to the «tension» between the two sequences, since it is what generates all narrative effects. Among the scholars present at the RRN conference, other attitudes can be found.

Prince comes to consider an operational definition of narrative: «understanding a narrative sequence is being able to answer correctly relevant questions about its meaning». This statement — inasmuch it stress that narrative is a meaning-generating device — entails that what is taken into account is the propositional level: «narrative sequences are semantic and not semiotic in nature, contrary to signs they are not recognized but apprehended as such», because «the ability to answer questions about the what, when, where, does depend, to some extent at least, on pragmatics». Taken as such, Prince's definition seems to focus on the level of *sjuzhet*, leaving to the theories of meaning the question of what the semantic content of a narrative is. To us, it is not clear enough whether he wants to depart from his previous definitions of narrative,<sup>21</sup> clearly based on an objectivist paradigm.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Cfr., for instance: «A minimal story consists of three conjoined events [e.g., “He was unhappy, then he met a woman, then, as a result, he was happy”]. The first and third events are stative, the second is



Another scholar who seems to focus his work on the level of the *sjuzhet* is Jean-Michel Adam: within the frame of a textual typology, he defines a text as «une séquence prototypique élémentaire» composed of «macro-propositions interactives», and specifies that the macro-propositions of narrative texts are «Situation initiale, Nœd, Action ou Évaluation, Dénouement, Situation finale». Thus, even if narrative is defined as a prototypical attribute that qualifies a text described as a complex linguistic structure, narrative itself is defined by virtue of the semantic content of the macro-propositions, what Adam calls «la représentation discursive».<sup>23</sup>

Many other examples might be illustrated, but we hope to have highlighted some crucial features that have to be considered in order to catch the differences between narrative theories. We think that a special attention is due to the role that is attributed to the two sequences in defining narrative, because it is a critical point that can decide for the integrability or the incompatibility between different theories. For instance, as noted by Meir Sternberg, «merely acknowledging that the genre requires two sequences means little, as witnessed by the two-make-one fallacy. The fallacy may even involve a claim or practice of alternative sequential focusing».<sup>24</sup> Along the line of this remark, recalling what announced in the first paragraph, we will try now to delineate a distinction between two main paradigms in narrative theory.

## 6. Different paradigms in narrative theory

### 6.1. The mimetic paradigm

The main question of narratology is: how can we define something as «narrative»? *How?* As we already pointed out, many attempts look at what is represented in narrative. Perhaps, this choice is very popular because a mimetic definition is intuitively fine: what we constantly do with language (and with many other semiotic systems as well) is referring to ‘things’, and what we refer to is often assumed to be ‘represented’, a mimesis. Therefore, if we specify what kind of ‘things’ we are referring to with the linguistic acts that we intuitively call «narrative», then we are on a good way to understand what «narrative» is. However, saying that «narrative can refer to ‘things’» is not the same as saying that «narrative represents ‘things’ that are x». A substantial entailment of the latter statement, and an often underestimated one, is that such belief lead us to attribute different ontologies to the discursive genres: a «narrative» is something identifiable thanks to some specific referential properties; an «argumentation» have some other specific properties, etc. Of course, this does not exclude that properties can overlap and be found at the same time in

active. Furthermore, the third event is the inverse of the first. Finally, the three events are conjoined by the three conjunctive features in such a way that (a) the first event precedes the second in time and the second precedes the third, and (b) the second event causes the third»; Gerald Prince, *A grammar of stories*, Mouton, The Hague, 1973, p. 31; Idem, *A dictionary of narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, London, 1987, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> For a possible interpretation of his opening, due the postclassical context, cfr. section 1 above. For more details about the objectivist paradigm, see section 6 below, and cfr. Meir Sternberg, *Narrativity: from objectivist to functional paradigm*, «Poetics Today», 31:3 (Fall 2010), pp. 507-659.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Jean-Michel Adam, *Essai de définition linguistique du récit*, «Actes de Savoirs», n. 4 (2008), pp. 113-127.

<sup>24</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Narrativity: from objectivist to functional paradigm*, cit., p. 635.

the same discourse; still, they are attributes that univocally identify a discourse as being of a certain genre.

We have made some comments about mimetic theories in section 3 and 4, and an helpful example about this topic might come from an anecdote of the RRN conference: in his listing of the different opinions about the minimum number of events needed to define narrative, Gerald Prince queried Meir Sternberg whether he believes that two events are necessary and sufficient for a definition of narrative. Sternberg's reply was straightforward: «I don't, but never mind». Despite Sternberg's pledge for a functionalist approach to narrative disqualifies it as inappropriate, we think that the question that Prince addressed to him hints at another important question that was not asked: are we able to produce a definition that accounts for what all and only narratives have in common without specifying what narrative represents, without specifying what elements constitute a narrative?

This is definitely a tough matter, which would deserve further consideration and a thorough investigation of the epistemology of those theories that refuse to assume a specification of its constituents as a necessary step for the definition of narrative. We would like to underline that such denial does not mean that narrative is not referential — i.e. it does not assume situations/events/eventualities as referents of the narrative discourse — simply, this is not a criterion we can use to define what narrative is. Narrative is referential insomuch «narrativity» is an attribute of the discourse and all discourses produced within a semiotic system have the ability to refer to 'things'.

## 6.2. The constructivist paradigm

A theoretical alternative to the mimetic paradigm is the constructivist approach. From such viewpoint, the relationship between the structure of knowledge and reality is conceived as a dependency of the latter to the former, i.e. reality is constructed via a structure of knowledge. To adopt such epistemological perspective entails that our ontological commitment toward the narrated reality has a strong correlation to the structure of knowledge of whom is experiencing the narrative. As a consequence, whatever elements of the narrative are considered to be its essentials, they cannot be conceived as something univocally given in the discourse, but should instead be regarded as the result of a process of actualization. This process is due to the interaction between instances of the knowledge domain and instances of the objectual domain; namely, for narrative, the specificity of the narrating voice, of viewpoint, of temporal sequence, has to be detected in dependence of the knowledge process and not with respect to a preestablished typology.

The theoretical paradigm just outlined is the basis of many approaches within narratology — and within humanities and social sciences at large — which aim at investigating the cognitive strategies, hermeneutic processes and mental schemata that configure the discursive interaction. David Herman, for instance, proposes «a specifically cognitive approach to narrative discourse [that] can potentially recontextualize reader-response theories contrasting shared and idiosyncratic reading strategies, for it shifts the focus from interpretive conventions to general and basic processing mechanisms that give such conventions their force and determine their scope of applicability».<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> David Herman, *Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology*, cit., p. 1049.

A critical issue is whether being a constructivist in accounting for narrated reality entails assuming a constructivist definition of narrative. That is, can we focus on the cognitive processes through which we construct narrative reality and then define narrative by virtue of what is represented in it? The question is open to different arguments, but we would like to consider now a particular standpoint based on a constructivist paradigm, that of the Tel Aviv school, and of Meir Sternberg in particular, whose narrative theory is explicitly founded on an epistemic principle, the Proteus principle.<sup>26</sup> Unlike most narratological cognitive approaches, Sternberg takes on all the epistemic consequences of a constructivist metaphysical position. That is, since what narrative represents is a construct, then a definition of narrative is justifiable only if it is based on the process of construction that it enables. He thus comes to a definition that assumes that the object of our narrative acts is the outcome of a subjective construction, a linguistic/mental representation, not a representation *per se* (a mimesis) — and this is true for all kind of narrative, not only fictional narrative.

The Proteus principle asserts the «many-to-many correspondences between linguistic form and representational function»;<sup>27</sup> and its adoption by Sternberg in the context of narrative theory can be briefly summarized as follow: given Sternberg's interest for the functions of narrative, and stated the ontological dependence of discourse on extra-discursive factors (the effects generated in the reader-discourse relationship), narrative forms cannot be identified by an exclusive function, they are rather appointed to many different functions, depending on the structure of knowledge by which they are constructed. In parallel, not assuming an independent existence of the narrative (being «narrative» the instantiation of a property, i.e. «narrativity»), its elements vary (within certain conventional limits) according to the structure of knowledge. That is, a certain function can be accomplished by different narrative forms, and a certain form can accomplish many different functions. The many-to many relationship is opposed to a one-to-one bi-univocal form-function relationship, to a one-to-many relationship (one form can accomplish different functions), and to a many-to-one relationship (many forms can accomplish the same function).

In our opinion, adopting the Proteus principle within narrative theory leads us to rethink the categories elaborated so far by both classical and postclassical narratology; and, even more radically, urge us to reconfigure the theoretical principle underlying such categories. According to the distinctive features of the postclassical turn described above,<sup>28</sup> the need for such an assessment is also affirmed by many recent approaches in narratology, insofar they rely on the assumptions that: (i) narrated reality is not codified in the discourse, it is constructed through cognitive strategies and dispositions involved in the hermeneutic process; (ii) the properties of discourse depend on reader's expectations, encyclopedic knowledge and teleological elements that pertain to the hermeneutic process. If we accept such assumptions about the metaphysics of narrative and we accordingly develop a narrative theory that is epistemologically coherent with those assumptions, then we shall as well assume the consequences that concern narrative elements of smaller extent. That is to say, it is impossible to univocally identify the properties of a narrative form, for instance, narrator's reliability, point of view, or even narrator itself.

---

<sup>26</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse*, «Poetics Today», n. 3: 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 107-156.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 112.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. section 2 above.

Facing such unavoidable entailments, a possible solution is that of adopting the Proteus principle. In our opinion, in order to overcome the difficulties encountered by classical narrative categories, concepts and terminology, it is not sufficient to redefine them in the light of a broader framework including contextual factors. Manfred Jahn maintains that postclassical narratology is aware of such necessity, and that it «prefers the Proteus Principle over the principle of univocity. Despite the fact that the Proteus Principle presents a negative and complicating condition, it enables the critic to recognise that texts materialise in a process of reversible decisions, and that text and world can only be interpreted in the frames and scripts of culturally inherited mental contexts».<sup>29</sup> If Jahn's claim holds true, a good season is forthcoming for narrative studies and for cognitive sciences, since the investigation of frames, scripts and mental contexts is still a widely unexplored field of research which can stimulate an interesting debate. However, we are not so sure of how many narratologists would subscribe to the fact that «texts materialise in a process of reversible decisions», especially if the Proteus principle is understood as «an “anti-foundationalist” axiom»,<sup>30</sup> i.e. incapable of providing the basis for a systematic and ordered typology of narrative forms.

Although Jahn acknowledges the Proteus principle as one of the fundamentals of many postclassical theories,<sup>31</sup> it seems that its «negative and complicating condition» is due to the fact that «processual dynamics and aesthetic significance [are] in urgent need of explanation».<sup>32</sup> We think that, the Proteus principle being an epistemological principle, it is just establishing the conditions that are presupposed in and necessary to the experience (of narrative), leaving to (narrative) theory the task of explaining «dynamics» and «significance». And this is exactly what Jahn does adopting Stanley Fish's process-oriented approach — a theory based on a constructivist epistemology,<sup>33</sup> as well as that of Meir Sternberg, built specifically upon the Proteus principle.

### 6.3. How can we build a constructivist theory based on a constructivist epistemology?

As we already said, Sternberg theory is constructivist in all regards: with respect to the discourse-reality relationship and to the parameters adopted for the definition of narrative. Before looking at the core of his theory we should bear in mind a few things entailed by a constructivist approach based on the Proteus principle: (a) «narrative» is something to which we attribute the quality of «narrativity», a mental construction that is the outcome of the reader-discourse relationship; (b) the task of the definition is to specify what are the rules that control this construction; (c) the rules have to indicate the specific form-function configuration that is common to all and only narratives.

Following this pattern, Sternberg elaborates a definition that satisfies conditions (a), (b):

narrative rules [are] distinctive, universal roles of sequence which govern (at will assimilate, “narrativize”) all other elements and patterns found in discourse at large. These generic

---

<sup>29</sup> Manfred Jahn, *Stanley Fish and the Constructivist Basis of Postclassical Narratology*, cit., p. 384.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, p. 377.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 384.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 377.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Ivi; *Idem*, *He opened the window and in flew Enza: Stanley Fish, nontrivial machines, and postclassical narratology*, «Frame», n. 16: 2 (2002), pp. 20-37.

master roles (to be called, in shorthand, “suspense,” “surprise,” “curiosity,” each with its proper dynamics between the telling and the told) are alone constant as a threefold set; everything else (including established favorites apart from time, such as perspective, space, character, verbal medium, or linear form) turns out to be variable, because nondistinctive by itself, if not dispensable, yet always narrativizable in the generic process.<sup>34</sup>

And a corollary that satisfies condition (c):

What distinguishes narrative effects as such from all others is less their play over time than their interplay between times. For it is the interplay of the represented and the presented dynamics, whether in “iconic” concordance or “arbitrary” tension, that sets narrative apart as a discourse with a double time-pattern.<sup>35</sup>

In brief, what all and only narratives have in common is that they generate suspense, curiosity and surprise through the interplay of two temporal dimensions.

Apparently, there is no trace of any mimetic bias in the very definition of narrative here recalled, however, some additional comments might highlight an aspect that is never developed by Sternberg, namely what kind of relationship there is between the narrative quality of discourse and its referential ability.

Interviewing Marie-Laure Ryan about Sternberg’s theory, she observed that «it does not tell us what a narrative text should be about [...], it only tells us what effect it should reach on the audience. There is a lot that it leaves presupposed: for instance, that these effects depend on time and on the representation of individual existents. [...] Sternberg’s effects presuppose a certain semantic content, something which he does not mention».<sup>36</sup> Her statement bring us back to the referential/mimetic distinction:<sup>37</sup> narrative is referential inasmuch «narrativity» is an attribute of the discourse and all discourses produced within a semiotic system have the ability to refer to ‘things’. When Ryan says that «effects depend on time and on the representation of individual existents», we presume she is alluding to the referential ability of narrative discourse, and we think she has detected an issue that needs to be clarified. Given that the «universals of narrative» are generated through the interplay between the represented and the presenting dynamics, does it entail that a semantic ‘content’ is necessary for their activation?

It seems that for Sternberg’s theory we can ask the same question that narrative theories usually ask: what is represented in narrative? What are the referents of the two sequences? But the only thing that Sternberg’s definition of narrative entails is that both sequences have some kind of temporal properties and that we perceive some kind of «deformation and deficiency»<sup>38</sup> between the respective temporal properties. How the temporality of each sequence is determined is a matter of the semantics of time, insofar the way in which language refers to time is a subject of semantics, even when semantics is integrated in a pragmatic theory of meaning.

---

<sup>34</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity*, «Poetics Today», 13: 3 (Autumn 1992), p. 472.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 519.

<sup>36</sup> Franco Passalacqua, Federico Pianzola, *Defining transmedia narrative: problems and questions. Dialogue with Mary-Laure Ryan*, «Enthymema», IV (2011), pp. 65-71.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. section. 6.1.

<sup>38</sup> «Far from located in the chronology, or chrono-logic, narrativity thus requires chronological deformation and deficiency [...]». (Meir Sternberg, *Narrativity: from objectivist to functional paradigm*, cit., p. 640).

Hence, although Ryan's objection might be overcome appealing to the domain restriction of the discipline, we would like to ask two further questions as a final remark: do we really need to postulate two sequences in order to account for effects generated from «chronological deformation and deficiency»? Can we assume, instead, that the reference point of our perception of «deformation» is our experiencing chronology in everyday life?

## 6.4 Some comments to the mimetic/constructivist distinctions

We had the chance to submit a brief and incomplete version of our remarks about the mimetic/constructivist distinction to some scholars present at the RRN conference. Although at the time we did not express our thought very clearly, we would like to quote here part of their answers, since we think it might be interesting to confront them with our comments.<sup>39</sup>

Brian Richardson:

The problem with a functionalist definition is that anyone can read anything as a narrative: a telephone directory, a shopping list, newspaper headlines, etc. That does not mean that they *are* narratives. Similarly, some texts lend themselves to being read as a narrative much more than others do. That is why I prefer an essentialist definition; for me a narrative is a representation of connected events of a certain magnitude.

Gerald Prince:

I believe that narratives are semantic rather than semiotic in nature. They are understood rather than recognized. We identify an entity as narrative through our concept/schema/idea of narrative.

People take many things to be narratives, including things that many other people would never consider narrative. But to take something as a narrative, one must think that this something corresponds to one's idea of what a narrative is, of what conditions a narrative must fulfill in order to be a narrative, etc. So that I can consider a blank piece of paper to be a narrative if I think it fulfills the conditions for narrativity (if I apply my "narrative grid" to it and it fits).

The narrative grid can fit more or less well and entities have different degrees of narrativity depending in part on how many conditions are taken to be fulfilled. To me an entity or text is a narrative if it is taken to be the logically consistent representation of a sequence of events. Other aspects of such an entity or text—for instance, that it generates fear and pity or puzzlement, surprise, suspense—are not relevant to the definition. They do not make the entity or text narrative or non-narrative. The same text can be a description, a narrative, an argument, etc. But, usually, there is a dominant: some texts are more descriptive than argumentative or narrative; some are more narrative than argumentative and descriptive; and so on. Also, of course, a reader can decide to read a text for the story it tells, the arguments it advances, the descriptions it provides.

---

<sup>39</sup> In asking our questions we used the binary oppositions representational/anti-representational or mimetic/anti-mimetic. We later came to understand that «mimetic» and «constructivist» are terms that better express the different epistemology of narrative definitions. Cfr. Franco Passalacqua, Federico Pianzola, *Narrative closure and the functionalist approach to narrative. Dialogue with Eyal Segal*, «Enthymema», IV (2011), p. 72.

One difficulty in taking into account all and only narratives, including possible, non-extant ones, is the variety of narrative media and their different powers and limitations (painting can do certain things that written language cannot do and vice versa). Determining what is common to all and only narratives implies knowing what these powers and limitations are.

Emma Kafalenos:

The difference in definitions of narrative from narratologist to narratologist reflects the varying interests and emphases of the narratologist, but these many definitions almost always include the basic requirement of the two paired sequences. Gerald Prince's definition of the minimal narrative—the representation of a situation and an event that changes it—asks us to recognize that a single event can create a sequence. My own definition—a sequential representation of sequential events—is influenced by Sternberg's focus on the interrelations between the paired sequences. Other narratologists' definitions include requirements in addition to—not in place of—the two paired sequences: a character who continues, causal relations, events that are interesting, characters' conflicting goals, a conclusion in which the narrator explains why she/he told the story, etc.

I see no contradiction between defining narrative and its elements and what Sternberg calls the "Proteus principle" (that the effects of narratives can be achieved in many different ways with many different structures). In fact, the two complement each other. One cannot analyze the many different effects of focalization, for instance, without being able to define what focalization is. Tamar Yacobi, writing in support of the Proteus principle, points out that contrary to general assumptions, unidentified narrators are not always reliable (her example is the narrator of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*) and character narrators can be absolutely reliable (her example is Gimpel in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimpel the Fool*).<sup>40</sup> To make her case she needs the distinction between types of narrators. But the Proteus principle, as I understand it, applies to the elements of narratives, not to the definition of narrative. In short, the two paired trajectories define narrative. The effect of the relation between the two trajectories can vary from narrative to narrative.

Michael Toolan:

In my estimation all of us present and speaking were/are, to a degree and in a sense, structuralists. Not in the strict Saussurean sense where a structure is a whole economy, with no outside, *ou tout se tient*, relationally and differentially; but in the sense that an architect is a structuralist and is interested in what combinations of posts and beams and panels will or will not—literally, in house-building—stand up, and not only stand up but be functional and even maybe pleasing to observe and experience and live in. By definition narratologists are concerned with narrative structure; they are also interested in representation (but representation need not entail direct, faithful, and realist or naturalist representation of the real world: in my view representation can take many forms, including highly constructivist ones).

---

<sup>40</sup> Tamar Yacobi, *Package Deals in Fictional Narrative: The Case of the Narrator's (Un)Reliability*, «Narrative», n. 9: 2 (May 2001), pp. 223-229.

## 7. Conclusions

As Raphaël Baroni remarked, «la narratologie est une discipline encore bien vivante et qui ne se limite pas à une seule approche épistémologique».<sup>41</sup> We certainly agree with this statement but a few more comments are due: on the one hand, we agree that the many issues and mutual critics that characterise narratology nowadays are a sign of the dynamism of the discipline, both in reconsidering past experiences and in delineating new possibilities of research. On the other hand, we strongly believe that dynamism and plurality within the discipline could be more fruitful if the participants to the debate would be able to build shared grounds, namely acknowledging what are the drawbacks of the narratological classical heritage and being ready to dispense with some consolidated categories if, when facing new forms of narrative, their flaws are disclosed.

Many new approaches and proposals are oriented along this line, and in order to encourage the debate we would like to briefly summarize the problematic issues and the questions raised in this paper:

a) Epistemological coherence. The adoption of the mimetic or of the constructivist paradigm should lead us to accept all the entailments of the choice, both on the epistemic and on the ontological level. With respect to the mimetic paradigm, an incoherence might emerge in adopting a pragmatic or functionalist approach (narrative is not identifiable in a structure), and an essentialist definition (narrative is defined by virtue of its properties, even though pragmatically or functionally contextualized).

b) Problems borrowing Sternberg's functional-rhetorical theory. The adoption of tools of his constructivist theory entails the assumption of the Proteus principle (especially that there is no biunivocal form-function relationship), and an anti-realist ontology (a discourse can be both a narrative and an argumentation at the same time).

c) Validity of the mimetic paradigm. How can we disprove the following objections by Sternberg? (i) «Narrative consists of two sequences, so it makes sense that a definition of narrative must somehow involve both sequences, not one — the mimetic one»;<sup>42</sup> (ii) it is not possible to semantically identify an object not in dependence to the theory adopted (an «event» is what we mean by «event»), therefore a definition cannot be based on referents or referent's properties.

d) Validity of the constructivist paradigm (Sternberg's version). How can we disprove the following objection by Marie-Laure Ryan? Sternberg's functionalist definition of narrative entails a semantic dimension, without which the three narrative universals would not exist. And, of a different order, our objection: do we really need to postulate two sequences in order to account for effects generated from «chronological deformation and deficiency»? Can we assume, instead, that the reference point of our perception of «deformation» is our usual experiencing chronology in everyday life?

e) Incompatibility between theoretic models. This is due to the partial awerness of some unavoidable issues (referentiality of discourse; essentialist/constructivist definitions; coherence of the epistemology-theory relationship), and to the absence of a shared terminology for many narrative categories.

---

<sup>41</sup> Raphaël Baroni, *Rapport du 1er colloque international organisé par le Réseau Romand de Narratologie*, [http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport\\_colloque\\_RRN2011.pdf](http://www.narratologie.ch/Rapport_colloque_RRN2011.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Reconceptualizing Narratology. Arguments for a Functionalist and Constructivist Approach to Narrative*, «Enthymema», IV (2011), pp. 35-50.